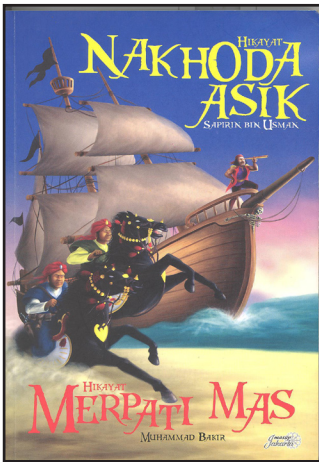


BOOK REVIEWS

Sapirin bin Usman, *Hikayat Nakhoda Asik*; Muhammad Bakir, *Hikayat Merpati Emas dan Merpati Perak*. Edited by Henri Chambert-Loir. Jakarta: Masup Jakarta, École française d'Extrême Orient, Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2009, 334 pp. [Naskah dan Dokumen Nusantara 26.] ISBN 978-979-1570-664 (soft cover).



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Over the last 25 years, Chambert-Loir has demonstrated his interest in Muhammad Bakir, a member of a family of Betawi writers in the nineteenth century, and his collection of manuscripts, by exploring this important era in the history of Malay literature in Indonesia. His latest work is an edition of two manuscripts from this collection entitled *Hikayat Nakhoda Asik* (The Story of Captain Asik, further referred to as HNA) and

Hikayat Merpati Emas dan Merpati Perak (The Story of the Golden Dove and the Silver Dove, referred to as HMM) accompanied by a critical review. Both manuscripts have been transliterated before: the HMM in 1984 by the National Library by an unknown transliterator and the HNA by Mu'jizah, published by the Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa, in 1995. A time lapse of almost fifteen years has apparently left its marks on the manuscripts so that the older transliterations (written when the manuscripts were still in a better condition) needed to be consulted in case of serious damage, although the writer mentions that "this edition is completely new".

This book presents several new points. First, although some mistypings managed to slip in, Chambert-Loir's usual accuracy gives us a far better opportunity to enjoy and understand the stories. Secondly, he throws light on a number of important aspects present in Bakir's writings earlier not found in Old Malay Literature and which certainly have not yet been discussed before. Also of importance and interest are the numerous wonderful illustrations which give the reader a clear impression of the character of the manuscript. The handwriting shows great variation and is sometimes very beautiful –

Chambert-Loir likens it to calligraphy –, and at other times negligent and disarrayed but always full of character. Other specific characteristics are also discussed, such as unusual spellings, strokes if a mistake was made, and drawings to illustrate a special points in the story. These photos also show us the sorry condition of our ancient manuscripts notwithstanding the fact that they are preserved in the National Library (Perpusnas).

As said above, if one of the objectives of this edition is to provide easier readings of these old stories, this objective has been achieved; among others due to a number of corrections made by the editor, a fact which is mentioned in the chapter on his editing principles.

After presenting the edition of both tales, subsequently are discussed: I. The Fadli library, II. Spelling and language, and III. Editing principles. The library of the Fadli family with its historical background, which is nineteenth century Batavia, stands out, among others, because of the large number of manuscripts it contained for those days. Manuscript owners could be found all over Batavia and in Nusantara in general, but ownership was usually limited only to one or two manuscripts, although those were also available for borrowing, which is usually mentioned in the first pages of the manuscripts. This kind of statement can be found in a number of manuscripts in the collection of the Perpusnas, as mentioned in Van Ronkel's Catalogue. This is also the case with the ownership of manuscripts in various areas of Nusantara. Therefore, a lending library with a collection of no less than 70 manuscripts may be considered highly unusual, not to mention the fact that this collection was managed, added to, and conserved by a family with a talent for writing. That the manuscripts were used as books to be rented out is also clearly something that was very unusual at the time and these facts shed light on the literary activity in Batavia during an era of transition, which is also described by Chambert-Loir in these books. The idea of creating a lending library may also have been inspired by the surroundings at that time.

With this background, Chambert-Loir questions the authorship of HNA and HMM which were meant to be sequential. Sapirin bin Usman al-Fadli or M. Bakir? Uncle or nephew? And the researcher comes to the conclusion that M. Bakir who is the nephew of Sapirin, his predecessor and teacher, has inherited HNA, copied it, and wrote its sequel, the HMM. He even wrote a second sequel which is unfortunately lost, and which was entitled *Hikayat Asma Tuturan* which is mentioned in a list of books in the HMM manuscript. The sequel was certainly meant to arouse the readers' curiosity regarding the further adventures of the familiar characters. Sapirin's authorship is, among others, indicated by the many parts in HNA that are written in Arabic which were often misquoted by Bakir as he is apparently not too familiar with the language. This is proven by the fact that in HMM the frequency of Arabic sayings and sentences is greatly reduced. It is still unclear why HMM is indicated as 'copied' (pp. 258 and 276) if it was written by Bakir himself.

Speaking about contextuality, Chambert-Loir suspects that a real natural event has influenced the author as the disaster described in the HMM is

very similar to the eruption of Mount Krakatau which must have occurred during Bakir's lifetime. The description of this disaster could probably be read in newspapers and heard being told from mouth to mouth so that it can be considered as input from the author's surroundings which was readily available due to modern communication. On the other hand, in spite of these modern surroundings Fadli remained faithful to the conventional pattern of storytelling according to the principles of Malay *hikayat*.

One very specific and interesting aspect discussed in the book is the role of a narrator who suddenly appears in both stories. Here Sapirin's writing is specifically discussed, describing a literary technique called the concept of the "almighty author" and the game between the author, storyteller, characters, and the public, not known in other traditional Malay tales. The phrases "*Hatta diceriterakan oleh yang empunya cerita, Thus it was told by the narrator*", "*Tersebutlah perkataannya, as the narrator relates*", mentioned before in this connection, may be considered as efforts to increase the credibility of the story by emphasizing its source. HNA and HMM clearly give a role to the real world outside the story, so that it seems as if the author goes in and out of his own story, and thereby asserting his role as director.

There are several examples indicating that the storyteller, the author, and the readers take part in the story. The storyteller even talks to the reader. There is a specific formula which describes the author's role as follows. "*Maka dengan takdir Allah melakukan kuasanya atas yang mengarang, with the will of God executing his power over the writer*", in Sapirin's work. M. Bakir is even one step ahead; for Chambert-Loir mentions him as "taking over the ambiguity of the concept of creation" by saying "*dengan takdir orang yang mengarang, by the decision of the person who writes*", in one of his other works. The power of the author as creator is fully manifested.

Based on several negative characteristics of the main characters which are not in line with his role as hero and the relation with several specific events in both stories, Chambert-Loir believes that "M. Bakir laughs cynically at the classical norms" which demand a perfect hero, and thus ridicules worn-out cliches.

I think that this evaluation is somewhat exaggerated because in classical stories the hero is also never perfect; remember Arjuna and Panji. The heroes are close to perfection only in stories with a religious colour. But it cannot be denied that with a Betawi background during times of change, it is certain that classical norms were being eroded by knowledge and modern, western experiences. As a human being living in such a society, Bakir searches for new forms without being able to liberate himself entirely from the old norms. Foregrounding the author can probably be seen as a method to introduce the author as a person who tries to please his readers and, thus, create intimacy with them.

The very specific type of spelling M. Bakir uses is an effort to make the Jawi writing system more explicit by adding manipulated signs (such as *fatha* [here written as *fatah*], *kasra*, and overturned *damma*) to indicate phonemes which are not found in the Arabic alphabet such as *e*, *ai*, *o*, and *schwa*. The *schwa* sound is indicated with the *tasydid* which is more common in older Malay manuscripts.

However, the other signs are not found in other Jawi manuscripts and are M. Bakir's own invention. In some other Indonesian languages the same system to indicate vocals with special marks is applied when using the Arabic alphabet like *pegon* and *Buri Wolio* writings. M. Bakir's efforts indicate that he considers the Jawi alphabet not quite perfect. The question then is: how readable was Bakir's manuscript for his readers? Is it possible that he suspects that some of his readers would have been unable to read Betawi words?

Chambert-Loir considers Bakir's spelling quite good: words originating from Arabic are written with etymological spelling, although there are several deviations. Words considered originating from a foreign language (in this case Sanskrit) are written with consideration of their original sounds (in this case *sy*). But a hypercorrect trend is also present: *besar* (big) is written *besyar*; this, however, is quite common in Old Malay manuscripts. The morphology and syntax of the text reveal the influence of various languages, specifically informal Betawi dialect as well as several other languages. When using words that are not Malay, the author often provides (sometimes faulty) explanations and translations. This is not found in other Malay manuscripts.

Chambert-Loir's work explores a unique literary process and its cultural background in the process of undergoing a profound change which is Batavia moving from traditional to modern. M. Bakir, as one of its representatives, is an active participant in this process who translates all the restlessness of his time into words in a creative and original way. Chambert-Loir's research awakens our interest to further unearth and analyse other undetected gems in the literature of Nusantara.

Mu'jizah, *Illuminasi dalam surat-surat Melayu abad ke-18 dan ke-19*. Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, École française d'Extrême-Orient, Pusat Bahasa-Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, and KITLV-Jakarta, 2009, 204 pp. [Seri Buku Pustaka hikmah Disertasi (PhD) 2.] ISBN 978-979-91-0175-4. Price: IDR 70,000 (soft cover).

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In 1991, a bilingual book entitled *Golden Letters: Writing Traditions of Indonesia; Surat Emas: Budaya Tulis di Indonesia* (Annabel Teh Gallop and Bernard Arps) was published. It contains many illustrations of letters in Malay and Javanese written by Nusantara kings to European and other rulers in the past. Subsequently, in 1994, a book entitled *The Legacy of the Malay Letter; Warisan Warkah Melayu* (Annabel Teh Gallop) was published. Since